RSIS S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
Ponder the Improbable since 1996
IDSS Paper
Ponder. Analyse. Prepare. Engage. Refresh.
www.rsis.edu.sg No. 056 – 10 August 2023

No. 056/2023 dated 10 August 2023

Russian Maritime Power in a Long Ukraine War

Geoffrey Till

SYNOPSIS

Russia is preparing for a long war in which what happens at sea will be even more important. Will Ukraine and the West be able to cope, asks ***GEOFFREY TILL.***

COMMENTARY

Russia's recent attack on Reni and Izmail, Ukraine's main ports on the River Danube, was not an emotional response to Ukraine's naval attack on the Kerch bridge to Crimea, as it is sometimes represented. Instead, it represents a coldly rational calculation by the Kremlin: first, that a decisive breakthrough by either side on land is unlikely, and second, that the Russia-Ukraine war will therefore be an essentially attritional and protracted one. Third, it implies recognition by Russia that the sometimes overlooked maritime side of the conflict may well in the end prove decisive.

The suspension, or maybe end, of the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) is a gamble for Russia since it will adversely affect countries with which it seeks good relations, not least China – one of the biggest importers of Black Sea wheat. President Vladimir Putin's offer of free grain to six key countries in Africa shows that he needs to protect Moscow's recent advances in an area of increasing strategic significance. More widely, he has to limit the damage Russia's withdrawal from the BSGI does to its international standing, lest his actions seem to confirm the West's narrative about the conflict.

Suspending the deal is worth the risk, however, in that it allows Russia to inflict long-term damage on Ukraine's all-important grain and fertiliser industries through attacks on the grain storage and loading facilities in its coastal and river ports, undermining further the resilience of Kyiv's war economy. In turn, this move will increase Ukraine's dependence on financial support from a West that Putin believes to be increasingly weary with the rising costs of providing it.

The Russians know that the expedients now having to be considered of alternative road, rail and even river-based transportation will never deliver the economies of scale attained by "bulkers" (large grain ships). A bulker carrying 100,000 metric tons of wheat is the equivalent of 1,000 rail cars; moreover, Ukrainian railways operate on a different gauge from Western Europe. This requires complex transhipment in the middle as well as at both ends of the grain's journey.

The same applies to making more use of the Danube. This is not as easy as it sounds. Greatly increased traffic would seriously disrupt normal trade on the river. It would demand financial and political investment into supporting infrastructure – although the United States has made resources available for this, Croatia in particular has been supportive of the idea and the European Union has promised to help establish "solidarity lanes" in order to transport the grain through Europe. Nor is it clear from the Russian attack on Ukraine's Danube ports that such a river traffic would be free of military risk. This has already had adverse economic effects on all of Russia's adversaries, Moldova especially, not least through the requirement for enhanced insurance cover.

Even if the BSGI is resumed at some point, Ukraine will be much less able to take financial advantage of it in the longer term than Russia, whose equivalent industries are currently undamaged. In the short term, moreover, the reduction in the volume of wheat exported increases its price (currently spiking between 9% and 15%), adding still further to Russian profits, a point that President Putin has been keen to make to his own people. At the moment, the Russian economy is in surprisingly good shape. All this puts Russia in the best position for the next attritional phase of the long war which Russian leaders now seem to expect, as seen in Moscow's recent extended mobilisation of all males between the ages of 18 and 30.

Russia's maritime strategy surrounding the Black Sea, including its recent attacks on Ukraine's main ports on the River Danube and the suspension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI), may yet prove decisive for the Russia-Ukraine war on land. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

The danger that this maritime challenge might prove to be a war-winning one has inspired a number of suggested responses, but they all have significant difficulties. President Volodymyr Zelensky, ever conscious that unlimited Western support over the long term could be problematic, was quick to come up with the most obvious one, namely, doing the same to Russia by counter-threatening its grain traffic. Ukraine's currently very limited, if innovative, capacity to contest Russia's control of the Black Sea makes this operationally very difficult. Moreover, any success in such a campaign would undoubtedly be represented by Moscow as a "terrorist" assault on the free grain Moscow was sending the starving millions of Africa.

President Zelensky has also suggested the defensive option of re-routing departing Ukrainian grain ships through NATO waters in the Black Sea in the hope that doing so would deter Russian attack. Although perfectly legal as an exercise in the freedom of navigation, it seems doubtful whether Romania, Bulgaria, or Turkey would be content with such a move. Reportedly, the US navy was also far from keen. Still less enthusiasm has been shown for the suggestion made in some quarters that NATO escorts Ukrainian grain ships through to the Turkish straits, possibly reflagged to NATO nations, as in the case of *Operation Ernest Will* back in the 1980s. Unless Turkey changes its interpretation of the Montreux Convention in order to allow wider access to the Black Sea by non-riparian NATO navies such as those of France, Britain or the United States, the escorting function would most likely fall to the limited navies of Romania or Bulgaria or the capable Turkish navy itself. Whether any of them would be prepared to accept the increased risk of escalating the conflict with Russia, or the high insurance costs for merchant ships attempting any such passage, seems doubtful. Admittedly, given the reports in some quarters that the original BSGI was accepted by Moscow only after Turkey raised some such possibility, this option is not impossible, but it would clearly be controversial.

Generally, Ukraine's capacity to threaten or inflict equivalent damage on Russia's grain exports is limited by the often forgotten fact that the Black Sea remains much more of a Russian lake than a Ukrainian one. The sinking of the Russian cruiser *Moskva* in the early stages of the conflict and the Russian Black Sea Fleet's reluctance to close the Ukrainian coast still allows Russia to enjoy most of the strategic benefits of sea control that a largely intact and still very capable naval force offers.

Russia has now imposed a near-total blockade on Ukraine. As the recent strikes on Odesa have shown, Russia can use the sea as a base for strikes from multiple directions against the shore, which complicate Ukraine's already strained air defence system by threatening vital but less well defended objectives in the strategic rear. Russia's Kh-22/32 and long-range P-800 Onyx anti-ship missiles are effective weapons. If the Ukrainians could outflank Russian defences with surprise, small-scale amphibious landings (*desant* operations) of the sort so common in this same area during the Great Patriotic War, they could restore operational movement to an attritional conflict on land they still seem unlikely to win. But Russian operational dominance at sea denies the Ukrainians any real chance of conducting such amphibious landings.

More widely, the Russian navy, particularly with its very capable submarine fleet and the "wonder weapons" that Putin has made so much of, is a persuasive indicator of the country's residual deterrent power despite the so far lacklustre performance of its army. Through his assertive use of Russian naval power, his calculated nuclear ambiguities, and his propensity to accept operational risk (evidenced by the attack on the Ukrainian port of Reni a few hundred yards from Romania, NATO's front line), President Putin may well be aspiring to "escalation dominance". By winning the capacity to determine the rules of the game, he forces his adversaries into a disadvantageous reactive mode.

The Russian navy is also proving useful in supporting the general battle of the narrative for international opinion, particularly in the so-called "Global South" – a campaign essential for Moscow's ability to defend itself against the economic sanctions that the West has imposed. In this, Africa is proving an area of increasing strategic significance. The Russian navy's opening of a naval base in Sudan on the Red Sea and its recent exercises with the South African navy have helped sustain an unwelcome level of convenient sympathy in Africa for the Russian cause, despite Moscow's withdrawal from the BSGI.

President Putin's constant references to the 18th century golden age of Peter and Catherine the Great and his well-publicised Navy Day inspection of the Baltic Fleet on 30 July at St Petersburg remind us that he has always been a keen advocate of Russia's resumption of great power status through the development of its maritime and naval capabilities. Accompanied significantly by some African leaders, he praised the navy for its performance and promised it 30 new ships this year. This maritime approach is entirely consistent with Russia's centuries-old push down to the south and was in part responsible for Russia's reclaiming of the Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of February 2022. It all suggests that in the long war that now seems likely to be unfolding, Putin is hoping that what happens on land will be much affected, and possibly decisively so, by what he makes happen at sea.

The alarm which all this has triggered in the West suggests that some at least worry that Putin might be right. If that is so, to what extent can and might the West risk responding with its own maritime countermoves in order to recover the strategic initiative at sea?

Geoffrey TILL *is Visiting Professor and Special Adviser to the Maritime Security Programme at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).*
